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**A dental student view on learning gained through Inter-Professional Engagement with  
people experiencing homelessness**

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## A dental student view on learning gained through Inter-Professional Engagement with people experiencing homelessness

### Abstract:

Community engagement is an important element of the undergraduate programme at the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Plymouth, United Kingdom. This report presents a project that a group of second year dental students undertook with people experiencing homelessness, and provides an in-depth reflective account of its impact on the students' learning. The project formed part of the students' inter-professional engagement module and delivered an intervention to enable residents at a temporary accommodation centre to access dental treatment. As a result of the project, 14 residents received dental treatment. The groups' confidence in engaging with people experiencing homelessness and their understanding of the complex needs of this group also significantly improved. Community engagement modules can be an important learning tool for students' future practice and can help promote access to dental care for vulnerable populations.

**Key words:** Students, Dental; Homeless persons, education, community engagement

## **Context**

Community engagement is an important part of the undergraduate programme at the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Plymouth, (UK). In their second year as part of an Inter-Professional Engagement (IPE) module, dental students work closely with a host organisation in the community in order to develop and deliver an intervention to assist assisting disadvantaged populations to adopt healthy lifestyles. The objective of the module is to promote students' understanding of the barriers that different groups in the community have in maintaining good oral health routines and/or accessing dental care. It also seeks to improve students' clinical and interpersonal skills in a non-clinical setting, thus equipping them to provide a holistic care to their future patients.

This paper presents the IPE project that a group of students undertook with people experiencing homelessness in Plymouth, and provides a reflective account of the impact of the module on their learning.

## **Project aim**

Taking into account the higher levels of untreated disease in this population [1-4] and the difficulties they have in accessing dental treatment [1-5], the main aim of the project was to enable residents at a temporary accommodation centre to access dental treatment at a clinic run by Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise (PDSE). The project also aimed to improve their knowledge on oral health and dental access in Plymouth, and improve their confidence about going to the dentist.

## **Description**

### ***Literature search***

1 Prior to the project, the student group had little knowledge of homelessness and the  
2 challenges that people affected by homelessness face. In order to develop an understanding  
3 of the target group, a literature review was conducted to learn about the host organisation  
4 and the needs of its residents.

#### 5 ***Fact finding discussions with key workers and prospective patients***

6 Discussions with support workers and eight residents at the centre were conducted in order  
7 to gain a deeper understanding of the target population's needs. The residents emphasised  
8 that their main need was dental treatment. Notably, several reported that they had previously  
9 extracted their own teeth or carried out DIY dentistry.

10 Thereafter, the students met on several occasions to discuss the feedback collected from the  
11 focus groups and discussions with support workers, to plan a project that would meet  
12 participants' needs. Accordingly, a triage and education station on aspects of oral health and  
13 access to dental treatment were included in the project. The triage was carried out by a  
14 student under the supervision of a qualified dentist, who then referred patients to PDSE for  
15 treatment. All students had allocated roles and worked as a team to ensure that the triage and  
16 education station activities ran efficiently.

17 *Please insert figure 1 here*

#### 18 **Outcomes**

19 The project was successful in engaging 14 residents to attend dental treatment, representing  
20 25% of the centre's residents. This was significant, since national studies emphasise the  
21 difficulty for homeless people in signing up to a dentist [5]. The learning gained confirmed  
22 that the homeless population has significantly elevated levels of untreated dental decay and  
23 periodontal disease compared to the general population. Furthermore, difficulties regarding  
24 accessibility of dental care may be due to the unpredictable and chaotic lifestyles of people

1 experiencing homelessness, as well as frequently-changing housing situations. This is a  
2 consideration which dental professionals should be aware of when treating their local  
3 populations as it may influence treatment planning.

4 Prior to starting this project, the psycho-social features associated with the homeless  
5 population were not well understood by the students, who also held the belief that homeless  
6 people 'do not care for their health'. The community project enabled the group to engage  
7 with members of the homeless population who, through their first-hand experiences, gave  
8 the students a much greater insight to the challenges they faced. Through extended  
9 conversations, residents shared the circumstances that led them to become homeless, which  
10 included being as simple as a family member passing away which left unpaid debts and bills,  
11 resulting in them losing their house. This re-emphasised the statement from Shelter [6], that  
12 'one third of the population are only 1 pay check away from homeless' and allowed students  
13 to become more understanding of the reasons as to why oral health may not be an imminent  
14 priority for people experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, it became evident that issues  
15 such as complex mental health problems and substance misuse may influence motivation and  
16 ability to make and keep appointments. Thus, based on the complex circumstances that they  
17 face, the barriers to care for homeless people were a lot greater than the students initially  
18 anticipated. Some appear to be posed by dental professionals' responses to their needs,  
19 indicating that the dental profession requires a deeper and more empathetic understanding of  
20 this population's vulnerability.

21  
22 A study by Masson and Lester [7], suggested that the attitudes of medical students towards  
23 homeless people were more negative at the end of their medical school training. This  
24 appeared to be influenced partly by observed attitudes and behaviors of senior staff who  
25 perceived homeless people as 'less worthy of medical care' than others. This contradicted the

findings of the present project where students' negative preconceptions about homeless people had changed after the project. Where ours and Masson's and Lester's study [7] meet is in the influence of positive modelling of attitudes and the benefits of structured contact with patients who experience homelessness. The latter study [7] found that attitudes can harden over the course of a student's training, suggesting that encounters such as we experienced repeated over time with this vulnerable population might help sustain empathy.

In addition to improved understanding of the complex needs of people who experience homelessness, this module enabled students to improve their communication and team-working skills. Effective communication both with the University's support group (i.e. community engagement programme officer and academic supervisor) and the project participants was essential for the successful development and implementation of the project. It enabled students to explore participants' expectations and listen to their ideas in order to create an intervention that is both wanted and going to be of greatest clinical value. Although sometimes challenging due to different perspectives among the group members, team-work was essential for the distribution of workload among the group's members and the utilisation of each one's strengths. The impact of the project on students' communication and team-working skills is significant, as these attributes can influence effective work in the clinical setting.

## **Conclusions**

Following the IPE project, the groups' confidence in engaging with people experiencing homelessness improved significantly. The students also improved their understanding of the diverse needs of vulnerable groups in the community and the complexity of promoting oral health interventions to them. The community engagement module at the Peninsula Dental School ensures that the students are not only immersed in the academic and clinical aspects

of dentistry but are also aware of and equipped to carry out community dentistry. Such modules can be an important learning tool for students' future practice and can help promote access to dental care for vulnerable populations.

#### **Declaration of interest**

None

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Our participants

#### **Figure captions**

**Figure 1:** Dental students alongside Wendy Smith and Abigail Nelder from the charity Well Connected, Rob Witton, IPE module lead and Martha Paisi, academic supervisor.

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